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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the context that has encouraged the emergence of more than 100 employer-linked charter schools throughout the United States and examines the efforts of the employers and educators who are involved in employer-linked charter schools. The paper begins by explaining how the following business changes have promoted development of employer-linked charter schools: technology; globalization; escalating customer expectations; view of people as a strategic element; and extended enterprise. Discussed next are the promise of employer-linked charter schools and the natural affinity between employers and charters. Examples are then presented that illustrate the following key elements of employer-linked charter schools at work: founders' vision; learning in context and in the world; meeting workforce development needs; charters' relationship to traditional school systems; unique features of employer-linked charter schools; curriculum innovation; raising standards; assessment of student achievement; flexibility in staffing; and role models and mentoring. The paper's conclusion emphasizes the following findings regarding employer-linked charter schools: they provide compelling evidence of what charters can accomplish; they can increase the level of ownership by the business community; their relationship with public education can take many forms; they serve diverse as well as disadvantaged student populations; and they are an experiment in progress. (MN)

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INTRODUCTION

If you want to know about the state of America's schools today, what you see depends on where you stand. From an educator's perspective, schools are serving more young people, better than ever before. More young people than ever are graduating from college, and those with higher education degrees are finding jobs. A strong economy is also providing more job opportunities—even for those such as young African-American males who have not shared in job gains during most of the last ten year's economic recovery.

However, as employers—racing into an increasingly demanding future—look at public education, they see yesterday's solutions failing to keep pace with the learning demands of today and tomorrow.

The dramatic changes occurring in the way businesses organize work and the skills demanded to succeed in today's labor market are driving new creativity and change in education delivery. Competitive pressures on firms in all industry sectors have accelerated the gap between current jobs and the technical skills demanded in emerging occupations and the preparation most young people get in their basic academic program. When qualified workers can't be found (the case now in almost every community across the country), the competitive edge and viability of companies and communities are at stake.

In recent years, business and educational leaders have come to better understand the challenge and the need for action, as well as the nature of effective response. As we approach the year 2000, there is a tremendous national focus on improving public education—in Washington, in state capitols, and in major urban centers like Detroit, Chicago, and others that have taken dramatic action to try to improve flagging public school systems.

There are, as always, competing ideas for reform, ranging from vouchers, to high standards, to longer school days, smaller classes, and more technology among a score of major reform agendas.

Charter schools are one significant element of reform. Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia now have passed charter school enabling legislation. If current enrollment trends hold, more than 350,000 students will be attending over 1,500 charter schools during the 1999-2000 school year. Charter schools in several states will soon serve between 5-10% of the public school population in certain communities, creating significant new marketplace dynamics in public education. With their increased flexibility, such schools provide a rich and growing laboratory for redefining public education. And within the universe of charter schools, dozens of education and employer innovators have forged an effective learning program by crafting a strong employer/school learning partnership.

These employer-linked charter schools—studied and supported by the U.S. Department of Education through a technical assistance initiative managed by Public Policy Associates and the National Alliance of Business—demonstrate how several powerful threads of reform can be brought together to transform the educational experience, improve learning outcomes, and prepare a workforce for the 21st century.

The premise underlying the original technical assistance plan developed with the U.S. Department of Education for the employer-linked charter school project has been dramatically demonstrated: that charter schools are an attractive and potentially powerful means for employers and innovative educators to come together. Two years ago, the project partners saw a handful of employer-linked charters emerging in states with early charter school laws and felt the field was ripe for additional growth.

What is seen emerging in the field is nonetheless startling. *Literally dozens of charter schools are attempting to organize their learning programs with employers and other community institutions as primary partners and focus for learning.* The freedom to

work “outside of the box” afforded by charter schools is proving a powerful vehicle for business, community, and education entrepreneurs to come together and implement new learning regimes, programs that are reaching a significant number of disadvantaged youth as well as mainstream students.

Finishing our second year of work—combining research, development, and the field testing of technical assistance and communication materials in support of employer-linked charter schools—the project team has discovered:

- There are over 100 charter schools in place or under development that are employer-linked charter schools, where business partners are a key collaborator and resource for the school’s learning program.
- There is tremendous interest on both the employer and educator sides to develop additional charter schools with an active learning partnership between the school and firms, networks of firms, and other community organizations.

This paper describes the context that encouraged so many employer-linked charters to emerge and examines the pioneering efforts of employers and educators who are partnering on powerful learning models in employer-linked charter schools.

THE CASE FOR EMPLOYER-LINKED CHARTER SCHOOLS

Pressing Workforce Development Needs and The Changing Nature of Business

The story is, by now, all too familiar. Most regions and industry sectors in the country are facing skilled-worker shortages. Employers are finding themselves scrambling to locate workers who can meet the skill demands of the workplace. In 1995, one in three corporate economists surveyed reported that their firms were having problems finding skilled employees. Today, that figure has jumped to 58%¹.

Why do so many American workers lack the skills necessary to succeed? The answer lies in the staggering changes that have overtaken the workplace in the last 20 years and continue to unfold at a quickening clip. For the past 20 years, global competition, fed by advanced manufacturing techniques, superior quality, and lower costs, has pushed many American businesses into a new workplace paradigm. Entire industries have lost their place on the American business landscape. New information-based industries have emerged. Manufacturing operations, banks, hospitals, and even public agencies have restructured dramatically in response to competitive pressure and new marketplace realities, eliminating bureaucracies, re-engineering, and improving worker skills to provide more efficient and effective services and better customer satisfaction.

Today, America is again a world leader in many critical industries, and many companies that had been declared at death's door are revitalized world competitors. One result has been that the workplace has changed dramatically and, with the Internet as the clear example, continues to change rapidly. What is produced, how it is produced, where it is produced, who produces it, who gives and takes orders, job security, competition, and the need for continual learning are all new in today's business climate.

¹ The Promise of Charter Schools and School-to-Work, National Alliance of Business, 1998

High-paying jobs that required only strong muscles and a good work ethic are vanishing. As described in Table 1, workers need to know more and learn throughout their careers in order to land and keep a good job today. For new workers, the education system must continually adapt.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Old and New Business Climate

Old	New
Brawn/metal-bending	Brains/mind-bending
Mass production	Small lots
Standardization	Customization
Hierarchies	Teams
Job security based on seniority	Job security based on skills
Job-specific skills	Broad skills
Limited competition	Global competition
Raw materials and manufacturing	Value-added products and services
Finite education	Lifelong learning

Despite current economic success, this is not the time to declare victory. Today, employers realize they must be more proactive than ever before in preparing the highly skilled workforce they need.

Just as businesses manage a manufacturing supply chain (product development, processing, and delivery), so, too, must they help develop and manage a “knowledge” supply chain. Businesses must nurture various sources for their future labor force and experiment with a variety of delivery systems to meet their needs. They must become involved in designing processes for training workers to emerge with specified competencies and standards. They must help shape the delivery system through public education, career programs, school-to-work, and other workforce development

strategies. As the workplace changes, schools must respond with changes so that students can keep pace and learn to learn. Table 2 summarizes five trends in business today and what they mean to employers and educators.

Table 2: Business Changes and Resulting Implications

Business Change	Implications for Education
<i>Technology.</i> Technology continues its exponential growth. As technology becomes universally available, sustained competitive advantage can no longer be based solely on superior technology.	Behavioral flexibility, learning-to-learn skills, and baseline technological skills are essential to a modern curriculum.
<i>Globalization.</i> American companies once prospered by selling products within the U.S. with limited competition. Today, companies not only market globally but are motivated to create wealth, infrastructure, and knowledge workers on a global basis.	Education must avoid narrow, provincial solutions. Educators must integrate the academic curriculum with a larger workforce development portfolio while maintaining sufficient definition and focus so students can bridge the gap from education to employment.
<i>Escalating customer expectations.</i> Customer expectations continue to rise as they become more knowledgeable and as competition increases. Today's purchasers demand an unending variety of high quality goods and services produced quickly and cheaply.	Agility in learning and deployment is necessary. Human resource professionals must deliver employees from many sources to satisfy the strategic initiatives driven by escalating customer expectations.
<i>People as a strategic element.</i> Businesses are adopting new human resource practices to capitalize on the creativity, commitment, and discretionary effort of employees, while maintaining the flexibility to adjust the size and skills of the workforce on a near-continuous basis.	Industry skill standards can provide a foundation for assessing worker competencies and guiding worker recruitment, education, and training. Career models that identify pathways to occupations within an industry can help students take charge of their own lives and careers.
<i>Extended enterprise.</i> Traditional industry boundaries are blurring, if not crumbling. Companies and their executives are reconceptualizing the business world as a place bristling with coalitions, collaboratives, and communities—allied interests working together on shared visions with powerful potential for innovation.	The vision grows broader. Shifting the focus from the industry to the extended enterprise offers additional motivation for business to become involved in school-to-work programs.

To businesses with a vision of the future and their place in it, these changes are a golden opportunity. A growing number of companies have formed learning partnerships with secondary and postsecondary schools. Many more are wondering how to best encourage and facilitate education and workforce reform.

As Dr. Renee Lerch, Director of Workforce Development for the Ford Motor Company recently told the US House of Representatives Committee on Education and the Workforce:

“With the advent of public school choice in the form of charter schools, vouchers, tuition tax credits – and other less charted changes such as business looking at education as a business – our policies and initiatives must be nimble enough to ensure equity and educational excellence for all students in this country... However, after almost twenty years of reform efforts (both national and local) our education system is still not uniformly producing an acceptable outcome in terms of graduates with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the world of work. If we cannot figure out a way to simultaneously “jump-start” school systems across the country, I am afraid that the slow pace of change will tempt many businesses and other partnering organizations to “opt-out” of the public education reform effort. We need to explore strategies that promote speed, depth, and breadth of reform.”

THE EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE

The Fractured Landscape of Reform

Given the pressures for reform, a growing number of businesses and schools have joined forces over the past decade to find new ways to link traditional academic learning with acquiring workplace skill. A variety of names, models, and approaches to implementation of learning programs with business partners have been developed by state and national government policy, as well as by business interest over the last decade. A host of state and national efforts to identify and promote high content standards and, in particular, work-world relevant soft and hard skill standards have been furthered. None of these efforts has been uniform, durable, nor effective across the board. The names and agendas (employability skills, SCANS, tech-prep, school-to-work) have varied and changed.

Despite the lack of a coherent national and state policy architecture, much has been advanced and much learned about the effective employer-connected learning programs through these initiatives. Students enrolled in what have been deemed effective school-to-work programs tend to finish high school with both a strong academic background and applied knowledge about the workplace and the skills and abilities needed to pursue a career, a technical education, or a college education.

These students also demonstrate better long-term, labor-market outcomes and higher rates of postsecondary education and overall educational achievement than their counterparts in traditional public school programs. Race and class differences in education and labor-market outcomes have been demonstrably ameliorated in quality school-to-work programs. As Bailey notes in *School to Work for the College Bound*², students are more excited about school, and attendance and retention levels improve in quality school-to-work programs.

² Thomas Bailey, *School-to-Work for College Bound*, 1997 13

Workplace experience and exposure also provide an effective venue for applying academic skills mastered in the schools, for learning job-readiness skills, and for gaining meaningful access to employers. Work experience as part of education is viewed as a vital good. In his study *Implications for Youth Policy and Practice: Why Some Programs Shine*³, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation's Rob Ivry identifies as critical: "The centrality of paid work and internships as a motivator and venue for learning job readiness skills and gaining access to employers."

Taken together, all these reform initiatives—career education, “tech-prep,” career academies, apprenticeships, school-to-career, SCANS, the standards movement, and the movement to reform vocational education adding greater academic rigor—have provided a strong, though fractured, base to build on. Effective programs have demonstrated that focusing on core academic as well as job-readiness skills, integrating structured work experience and connections to mentoring adults, learning through applied contexts, and connecting to postsecondary education and work opportunities together combine to improve educational outcomes for youth.

Historically, some local business/education partnerships in this landscape have enjoyed great success. However, many businesses have had to struggle more than they wanted or expected with an educational system that is highly bureaucratized, resistant to change, and skeptical about using work-based learning techniques in a traditional high school curriculum. Many stakeholders viewed school-to-work and related initiatives as a tracking program for lesser-achieving vocational students. School-to-work partnerships have been too often sluggish and bureaucratic.

These factors collectively have driven many innovators towards starting employer-linked charter schools. The prospect afforded by a charter school of implementing core

³ *Implications for Youth Policy and Practice: Why Some Programs Shine*, American Youth Policy Forum, 1997

success principles unconstrained and unencumbered by bureaucratic demands, group decision making, regulatory constraints, and other real and perceived obstacles provides an excellent and irresistible opportunity to implement effective educational principles.

THE PROMISE OF EMPLOYER-LINKED CHARTER SCHOOLS

What Draws Innovative Educators and Employers to Reinvent Public Education

Charter schools are a rapidly growing school reform innovation. They are based on the premise that meaningful school reform can best be achieved in an environment free of bureaucratic constraints. There has been a growing realization that charter schools can create a unique opportunity to implement effective learning practices coming out of education partnerships with employers, provide new choices for students, and be vehicles for “out-of-the-box” practice.

Educators are excited by the idea of working in a school that allows them greater freedom to design and use innovative teaching strategies. Through involvement in design and management of a charter school, employers are given the chance to do more than simply complain about the quality of the entry-level workforce and the slow pace of education reform. Parents can find exciting alternatives to the public school located in their attendance zone. And students no longer need to feel that the traditional public school environment or curriculum does not fit their educational needs or career goals.

Across the country, education entrepreneurs and innovative employers are joining forces. They are taking the time to listen and learn from each other and are working together to develop educational programs that will help ensure the future success of our most precious resource: our children.

EDUCATION INNOVATORS AND EMPLOYER-LINKED CHARTERS

By designing a new charter school with employer partners, educators get the opportunity to put in place practices and principles that are driving much of today’s education improvement efforts. Educators can:

- *teach and learn in context.* The distinction between theory and practice as separate and distinct learning modes is blurring. Combining contextual learning

and project-based learning—often drawing upon workplace and "real world" contexts—with theoretical learning is a major part of reformed educational practice and can be developed in an employer-linked school.

- *elevate workplace culture skills.* Educators are coming to realize that not only has the bar on the three Rs been raised, but that they need to be supplemented with "soft skills," or "new basic skills," demanded in today's workplace. Problem-solving, teamwork, and analytic ability, as well as familiarity with the processes and culture of work environments, are increasingly recognized as essential to the new learning package that must be delivered in order for young people to succeed in life and work.
- *put a purpose to education.* There is a growing body of research demonstrating that career-oriented learning environments—that teach content in the context of a career area and make work experience a cornerstone of the learning program—do improve students' academic achievement, interest, and retention in school. A growing number of these so called "school-to-work" initiatives are rigorous education programs that engage high school students for at least two years in concentrated learning and work that is organized around a particular occupation or industry.
- *provide new choice options.* Increasingly, educators are realizing that one size does not fit all and are developing choice options for students, paths of education they can take and customize to their own needs, interests, and abilities. One such model is the charter school.
- *work with other innovators.* Charter school teachers get to "self-select" and work with other self-selectors who want to innovate, want to change, and will welcome the opportunity to try new things.

EMPLOYERS AND CHARTERS: A NATURAL AFFINITY

A number of pioneering firms, including Ford Motor Company and DuPont, began the employer-linked charter school movement and joined with innovative educators to apply the principles of school-to-work to the charter school concept.

There are a number of reasons why charter schools fit employer goals, mindset, and practice. Charter schools emphasize results over processes, which resonates with business.

Charter schools are also attractive because they have the flexibility that most public schools do not. Whether the issue is schedule, location, or learning approaches, charter schools can accommodate program design issues that emanate from special business requirements associated with demanding workplaces and a dynamic economy.

As described in Table 3, charter schools and highly competitive businesses share several important needs.

Table 3: Common Needs of Businesses and Charter Schools

Need	Example
Prove oneself every day	In exchange for the deregulation they enjoy, charter schools must demonstrate that they are accountable for outcomes.
Attract and retain customers in sufficient quantities	Charter schools create educational competition—by aggressively recruiting students and by searching constantly for efficiencies, adopting a popular curriculum, or creating special services for students, business, and the community.
Define a suitable market niche and serve it successfully	Charter schools must be clear on whom they serve. Charter schools have been likened to research and development centers where new models are tried out, not only for niche markets but also for wide market penetration.
Distinguish between effective and ineffective employees and deal with each group appropriately	This simple, but important, distinction is essential to building a school and a faculty that can deliver on the promise explicit in the school's charter.
Innovate rapidly	The charter school movement is still inventing itself. Some approaches do not work, while some expectations are unfilled or overwhelmed. Charter schools cannot waste time and money if they threaten the school's accountability, so successful charter schools move quickly to change ineffective methods. They are able to do so because they are free from compliance with rigid regulations endemic to traditional educational hierarchies.

Charter schools typically have the entrepreneurial, customer-focused outlook that is normally associated with the most progressive businesses. Businesses that have not yet forged linkages with charter schools are missing this natural affinity.

For employers and business organizations committed to workforce development, charter schools represent an alternative for advancing that commitment. The independence, flexibility, and choice inherent in a charter school can provide the means to overcome many of the implementation challenges faced by school-to-work programs.

When a school-to-work program is melded with a charter school model, the result is the best chance businesses may ever have to gain from the educational system students with the desired academic and workplace skills. The businesses can see their investment in education reform pay off in terms of new, effective learning regimes for young people.

EMPLOYER-LINKED CHARTERS AT WORK

Progress To Date in Employer-Linked Charter Schools

Some powerful partnerships and promising learning approaches have been revealed in the nation's emerging employer-linked charter schools. They are a testament to the tremendous dedication of their founders and the tenacity of their staff and stakeholders.

Despite the many challenges involved in moving from a vision of schooling to actual operating reality, the leaders of many employer-linked charter schools are succeeding in making a new form of education available to a diverse population of students in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the nation. These schools face many challenges, and major "bumps in the road" continue to confront them. There is much here to inspire and inform other pathfinders in this largely uncharted territory.

KEY ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE EMPLOYER-LINKED CHARTER SCHOOLS

Creating an effective employer-linked charter school is an ambitious undertaking. Moving from concept to reality requires both dedication and skill. This section describes the major features these path-breaking charter schools held in common. It also discusses the key elements of the genesis, mission, curriculum, structure, and operations of the nine charter schools included in this study.

THE FOUNDERS' VISION

It takes special people to start an employer-linked charter school: people who are motivated by a vision of what "being educated" can mean to a young person's life. These people realize how education unlocks the door to a broader understanding of the community in general and enhances the likelihood that students will find meaningful work in the future. It takes insight and an entrepreneurial spirit to act on the opportunity of the charter school as a blank slate from which a new learning institution can emerge. A charter school can serve as a vehicle for channeling passion, creativity, and innovation into effective learning.

A powerful, shared vision—developed by the initial partners in the school’s conception and orientation—defined many schools and drove the charter development process forward.

- Tess Tiernan was a teacher in the Minneapolis public schools and was dedicated to helping at-risk youth “find their passion” in terms of a career interest. Unable to find acceptance for her approach within the school district, she searched for support from the community at-large, finding willing partners in the Minnesota Teamsters Service Bureau, the Minnesota Business Partnership, and the University of Minnesota College of Education. These partners shared her commitment to an outcome-based, experiential, school-to-work learning model. This shared vision led to the creation of the *Skills for Tomorrow High School*, a charter high school in downtown Minneapolis that provides a racially and culturally diverse population of students with the opportunity to explore a variety of career directions while learning about the needs and expectations of employers.
- A talented, charismatic, and popular assistant principal in the D.C. public school system, Iracema Salcido gave up the prospect of advancing to principal in the sluggish, bureaucratic D.C. system in order to craft and implement her own vision for learning. In 1996 and 1997, Washington, D.C. was experiencing a civic governance crisis. Ms. Salcido, active in the Latino community and mother of five children herself, had been intrigued and then challenged by other individuals who were starting charter schools to provide a better, more exciting path for learning for the Hispanic and African-American students languishing in the D.C. system. Most fundamentally, she wanted to help the kids from her community grow up to play leadership roles in the community as a whole. Since the primary business of Washington is public policy making, she envisioned a program that would prepare her young people for this “industry,” one that would take advantage of the resources of Washington’s government, non-profit, and educational communities to create a leadership high school focused on grooming leaders for tomorrow. The *Cesar Chavez Charter High School for Public Policy* was born.

- Cal Stone, an administrator of a drop-out retrieval program, had made a life-long commitment to providing these at-risk young people with the opportunity to not only earn a high school diploma but to regain a sense of self-worth and career direction that had faded without the social and emotional bonds of a supportive family. Members of the small business community responded to Stone's plea for support. Their shared commitment to doing "good work" in the community led to the development of the *Affiliated Alternatives Work & Learn Center* in Madison, Wisconsin, a charter high school that offers young men and women a second chance to build a productive future.

- Karen Butterfield, the 1992 Arizona Teacher of the Year, saw the potential for a school that would actively engage students in the learning process by combining visual and performing arts with an academically rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum. After approaching and being rebuffed by the local school district in her hopes to start a charter school, she found the ideal partner in Michael Fox. Fox, the Executive Director of the Museum of Northern Arizona, had his own vision of a museum with a broad community mission. Together, their imagination led to the creation of the *Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy*, a charter high school located on the grounds of the museum.

These and other educators and business leaders are working together in the belief that public schools can and, indeed, must play a pivotal role in preparing students to be successful as adults. For them, charter schools are a means towards that end. The schools they have created are a reflection of their belief that, in education, "one size does not fit all."⁴

LEARNING IN CONTEXT: LEARNING IN THE WORLD

⁴ Tess Tiernan, Director, Skills for Tomorrow High School, Minneapolis, MN.

One of the most dramatic and compelling lessons from employer-linked charters is the way in which the schools use the relationship with their partners as a window into the world and the workplace, creating a richly layered context for learning. Schools set in workplaces, museums, or where learning happens largely through community-based projects create powerful interactions with both the content and the people in the community. The constant interaction with adult role models and mentors in various capacities create new and powerful relationships for students. The students are directly exposed to today's work-world skill requirements (like problem solving and teamwork), as well as the demands of diversity. At employer-linked charter schools, classroom lessons take on new meaning. Students are more engaged in their studies, and expectations for appropriate behavior make more sense because they are viewed in the context of the workplace and society at large.

- Lisa was a pregnant teenager without a supportive family, without a high school diploma, and without any marketable job skills. Out of desperation, she turned to *Affiliated Alternatives Work & Learn Center*. In her first-semester work placement at a local day care center, she reflected on her own life experience as she learned how to care for and nurture pre-school children. In her second semester, she helped build a house, learning the value of teamwork and discovering the relevance of mathematics in a real-world application. In Lisa's third semester, she learned how to give of herself, assisting and developing meaningful relationships with adult participants in a day center for the elderly. In her fourth semester, she found fulfillment working as an aide in an Alzheimer's facility. When Lisa entered the program, her future was bleak. Now, she has occupational certifications, a job she enjoys, career-ladder plans, and great pride in her ability to provide a stable life for herself and her infant child. With the support and encouragement of the Work & Learn Center staff, Lisa was transformed from an alienated teenager to a skilled employee and an effective parent prepared to deal successfully with life's challenges.

- Students at *Skills for Tomorrow High School* rarely ask why a behavior requirement, dress code, or performance standard is applied at the school since they know that it all derives directly from the workplace. They also know that in the racially and culturally integrated environment of the school, being an effective part of a team means dealing with prejudices and stereotypes. The school takes on such issues explicitly, encouraging students to understand the "isms" of the workplace and develop strategies for success despite them.
- Sitting around a table, drinking pop and talking, students at the *Academy of Plastics Manufacturing and Technology* display the normal self-consciousness of 16 and 17 year olds. However, the transformation that occurs when students take a visitor into the plastics lab is dramatic. Dan, donning safety glasses, proudly shows the high-tech machine he has learned to operate, the parts he has learned to make, and the histogram record of quality tolerances he keeps and works to improve.

Students at employer-linked charter schools are actively engaged in the learning process and how their classroom extends beyond the traditional confines of the school. The workplace and institutions in society are their laboratory for learning. Employer-linked charter schools provide the freedom to create an academic focus that breaks the traditional boundaries of content disciplines and how they are delivered.

MEETING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

In the early 1900s, Henry Ford, inventor and entrepreneur, envisioned a world in which automobiles would be available to the common person. His view of education was built on a set of assumptions about the role of public schools in supporting the economy of that era: men would be trained to work on assembly lines, and women would be taught how to take care of domestic needs. Times have changed and so have the assumptions that undergird businesses' expectations for the role of public schools in preparing students for the 21st century workforce. There are many different ways in

which a charter school may serve our nation's workforce development needs as well as that of particular employers and industries.

- The founders of the *Michigan Health Academy* are dedicated to preparing students for careers in the health field, a growing employment area everywhere with high demand for skilled workers. The course of study at the academy prepares students to earn specific certifications so that they may successfully compete for entry-level positions in area health care facilities.
- Historically, the East Bay Conservation Corps served out-of-school young adults, many juvenile offenders through summer and year-round programs that educated them about the environment, gave them hands-on learning opportunities, and helped them learn citizenship by taking responsibility for their communities. Realizing that the modern workplace demands a comprehensive education as well as work-based skills, the leaders of the *East Bay Conservation Corps Charter School* are placing emphasis on competency-based instruction in academics, life skills, employability, citizenship, and communication. Students must pass competency tests in these areas to graduate.
- When representatives of companies who are partners in the *Academy of Plastics Manufacturing and Technology* visit students in person, they emphasize the many career paths that the school opens for students. These paths include immediate entry-level jobs, positions requiring additional technical training such as CAD (computer-aided drafting), and careers that could require four or more years of college. As one CEO remarked, "We view this as an investment in the future of our industry. We want young people to be familiar with the industry, and hopefully, many may choose to stay with it. We have a crying need for people in this industry, and we want young people to be positively exposed to the real thing."

From broad models of systemic reform to programs offering and/or encouraging choices among career paths to specific programs designed to meet demands for skilled workers in a specific industry, employer-linked charter schools offer great flexibility in designing programs to address our country's workforce development needs.

OUTSIDE THE BOX: CHARTERS AND TRADITIONAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS

Charter schools offer an opportunity to work outside the traditional school system to leverage change. Many of the educators and business leaders who founded these schools viewed charters as a way to avoid the bureaucratic constraints of the traditional public school. Very simply put, it is a way to get things done!

Charter schools do offer a vehicle for innovators and those interested in making change in education to "unbundle" the public education system—with its history, norms, and inherited patterns—and assemble a program to meet today's learning needs and goals for students and stakeholders such as employers.

For many employers in particular, the increased feeling of ownership afforded by direct involvement in school governance, curriculum development, and oversight is an attractive alternative to the frustration of working with the bureaucratic structures of traditional public school systems in their community. As evidenced by the examples outlined below, charter status has opened up new avenues for the development and delivery of innovative educational programs for students.

- Under Delaware's state school choice plan, many parents in the Wilmington area had opted out of the local schools by enrolling their children in other schools in the county, including non-public schools. Suffering from declining enrollment, the district launched a series of career or thematic academies to lure students back. But most of these academies continued to struggle. The county school superintendent in Wilmington approached DuPont to assist with the financing of the district's math and science academy, but DuPont wanted business to have a voice in the

management of the school rather than just give money. After supporting passage of Delaware's charter school act, DuPont took the lead in organizing a consortium of community employers who started and helped govern the *Charter School of Wilmington* that had previously been known as the science and math academy.

- The *Academy of Plastics Manufacturing and Technology* was spearheaded by a nucleus of leaders from area firms who had become disenchanted by the well-intentioned but unstructured school-to-work efforts underway in the community. They were attracted to the idea of being the governing group of a charter school, where they could set the agenda and direction of the school and drive the development of the curriculum. The education leadership at the St. Clair County Intermediate School District in Michigan wanted to embed a charter school within an existing vocational institution. They knew their vocational education advisory boards were not really working and wanted to break out of the mold of traditional vocational education. The charter school gave them the freedom to change. The county school district is counting on the success of the Academy to encourage acceptance of charter schools as a model for innovative educational delivery in other, existing vocational programs.

In addition to serving as a vehicle for innovation in education, employer-linked charter schools can be developed to serve a variety of goals in affecting and influencing the existing school system and structure. Among the schools studied, some were constructed explicitly to use a new framework and demonstrate its power to be replicable within existing schools. Some were set up to compete with and push reforms within the current system. Others schools were chartered—with the support of the district—as a way to breathe new life and energy into dying and moribund existing schools. Many were created to serve special or niche roles within the area's existing school system.

The possibilities inherent in thinking and working "outside the box" that are offered by charter schools, as well as the deliberate ways in which these schools were designed to fit as part of change within the public school system, demonstrate both the breadth and power of change that can be afforded through these new learning communities.

- The *Palisades Charter High School* Governance Council adopted an ambitious mission to serve the educational needs of a diverse school community by using an interdisciplinary curriculum, opportunities for "real world" involvement, and the use of advanced technologies. Having previous experience with school district bureaucratic hurdles that prevented change and creativity in the best interest of students, the council's strong resolve to accomplish their mission led them to seek charter school status.

UNIQUE FEATURES OF EMPLOYER-LINKED CHARTER SCHOOLS

In addition to the broad themes of change afforded by employer-linked charter schools, there were a number of specific elements of learning that were uniquely and creatively redrawn in the profiled schools. Those elements involve curriculum innovation, raising standards, assessment of student achievement, flexibility in staffing, and the provision of adult role models and mentoring.

CURRICULUM INNOVATION

As outlined in the following examples, charter schools give teachers and business people license to develop new and innovative approaches to the curriculum, setting new standards for integrating academics with context-based instruction.

- At the *Henry Ford Academy*, the instructional day is divided into three two-hour blocks of time. The academic curriculum, which is aligned with state standards, is presented through the lens of manufacturing. In the morning, students study manufacturing arts (social studies and English). Mid-day activities include physical

education, German, and lunch. They also receive academic coaching during a 30-minute period in which Ford Motor Company employees visit the school to provide remediation and/or enrichment for individual students. In the afternoon, students focus on manufacturing sciences (math and science). Throughout the instructional day, teachers strive to link artifacts from the Henry Ford Museum (where the school is located) to daily lessons. The academic year is punctuated by several manufacturing units that integrate academics into a project-based learning experience. One such unit has students learning about all the steps in the manufacturing of a decorative mirror, from initial design to planning and mass production.

- In addition to integrating resources between the school and external institutions, *Flagstaff Arts and Leadership Academy* is working to integrate arts and academics as well. The academic dean of the school described major focal units that serve to integrate the process of education as well as its products. For example, a unit on the Colorado plateau provides opportunities for integration of archeology, geology, anthropology, and the visual arts. While the process of developing full integration is still underway, some illustrations are instructive. When a Native American potter came to the Museum of Northern Arizona (where the academy is located) as an artist-in-residence, he had an opportunity to utilize artifacts from the museum's collection to illustrate for the students the historical antecedents of his own work. During the potter's instruction on traditional techniques for firing clay pottery, the earth sciences teacher dropped in to discuss the chemical and physical changes that the heat of the firing process causes in the material. In this instance, museum resources and staff were effectively connected with both the arts and academics of the charter school.
- The curriculum at the *Affiliated Alternatives Work & Learn Center* is organized around four themes, one for each semester of the two-year program. Those themes include human interaction (child development, effective parenting, marriage, and

family), consumer competence (how to rent an apartment, balance a checkbook, get a job), citizenship and law (individual rights and responsibilities and government), and identity (discussion of difficult world issues, personal decisions, post-high school decisions, and career planning). In addition to the major theme of each semester, each student has an individualized math program and literature that relates to that theme. Throughout each semester, each student learns to trust and bond with a single teacher who coordinates both classroom and related work-world activities.

With the support, encouragement, and active involvement of employers, innovative educators are seizing the opportunity to develop new and exciting approaches to curriculum integration within a charter school context.

RAISING STANDARDS

Setting high standards for achievement—and communicating those standards to students, their parents, and the community at large—was at the foundation of the employer-linked charter schools that were studied. That fact is clarified in the following examples.

- In its recruiting materials, the *Academy of Plastics Manufacturing and Technology* makes it clear that students choosing to enroll at the school will be expected to meet high academic standards and expectations. The goal of both the school's administrator and plastics industry partners is to enrich the curriculum to the fullest extent possible. The school's administrator is working to see the academic side of the program enriched with enough math and other skills so that academic credit for the Tech Center work can be gained from the home high school. The education committee of the plastics industry is developing national standards and assessments that will ultimately serve as a blueprint for the school's curriculum. Academy graduates will meet the defined standards for entry-level work in the plastics industry. In addition, the progression of skill standards between the academy and the local community college is becoming more fully developed.

- Leaders of the *Affiliated Alternatives Work & Learn Center* are taking issue with the historically low academic standards for at-risk students—a "dumbing down" of the curriculum that makes a boring instructional approach even worse. In response to recently adopted academic standards in the state of Wisconsin, the school has assumed a leadership role in developing a model curriculum and instruction based on a theoretical foundation provided through the Accelerated Schools model. The Work & Learn Center has accepted the challenge to design a model program for high school students that may ultimately be disseminated across the country.

Employer-linked charter schools are combining innovative approaches to curriculum with high academic standards in order to prepare students for success in the 21st century workforce.

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Measuring success is important to the leaders of employer-linked charter schools. From a business perspective, one measure of success is the ability to attract and keep students. But even more important is the desire of founding partners to improve learning outcomes. This increased attention to performance has led to the development of an array of tools to assess student achievement. Often, these assessments provide additional, valuable information on student skills that go beyond the traditional or required state academic tests.

- The goal of the *East Bay Conservation Corps Charter School* program is to expose young urban adults and prepare them for successful entry into the workforce. At entry into the program, a large number of corpsmembers test at a second- or third-grade level on the Test of Adult Basic Education. Many corpsmembers have received a high school diploma from a previous school but still are achieving at a third-grade level and are unprepared for the workplace. The school felt that a new curriculum needed to be developed, one that would define exit criteria for a diploma that would represent academic and workplace preparation. The charter school's

curriculum now includes five competencies—academics, life skills, employability, citizenship, and communication. These levels of competency allow for certificates of mastery at specific points of achievement. In addition to the academic component, corpsmembers can be certified for using heavy machinery and tools such as forklifts, chainsaws, and weed-eaters through work-based experience. They can also earn certification in CPR and first aid.

- Despite its career orientation, most, if not all, students at *Skills for Tomorrow High School* plan to go on to college and feel that the school is preparing them to achieve that goal. As a culminating experience, students present their portfolio to a panel of employers and other community members who prepare questions for the graduate. The presentation is typically attended by other students, friends, and family. For students and faculty alike, the portfolio presentation is a profound experience in which the students tell the world who they are, what they have accomplished, and what they aspire to. As both a test and a ritual, it serves as an important transitional point for students.
- Students at the *Academy of Plastics Manufacturing and Technology* are graded on a combination of their attendance, performance on quizzes and assessments around substantive knowledge, and actual performance in the manufacture of metal and plastic parts. One unified grade point is awarded from this combination of assessments.

The employer-linked charter schools that participated in this study serve a broad range of students. They use an array of different program structures, with different sets of outcome goals and expectations for student growth and development.

FLEXIBILITY IN STAFFING

In addition to having license to develop innovative approaches to curriculum, employer-linked charter schools offer greater flexibility in dealing with staffing issues.

- At the *Affiliated Alternatives' Work & Learn Center*, teacher certification requirements threatened to destroy the carefully crafted relationships between teachers and students that were at the core of the center's educational program. In order to strengthen the bond between students and teachers, the academic schedule was specifically designed so that a student would spend an entire semester with a single teacher who taught across the curriculum. This approach was inconsistent with the local school district mandate that restricted teachers to teaching within their area of certification. It was the school's charter status that allowed it to continue this practice.

- The teachers at the *Charter School of Wilmington* are not unionized; they are referred to as partners, not employees. Their base pay is the lowest paid in the state, at 95 % of what public school teachers make. However, because they are eligible to receive an annual bonus based on the school's performance, the teachers at the Charter School of Wilmington were the highest paid teachers in the state in its second year. The bonus—which is determined by an advisory board consisting of business people, parents, and representatives of the community—is based on school performance in terms of finances, student performance, and parent satisfaction.

Whether it is the ability to offer creative staffing solutions that enhance instructional practice, create new incentive structures that reward employees for high performance, or involve teachers in the activities and culture of participating firms, charter schools allow school organizers and operators to make decisions about staffing that break traditional patterns. The starting point for staff decisions can be deciding what is the best skill-mix, structure, work routine, and professional development that can meet the goals of the school, its stakeholders, and students.

ROLE MODELS AND MENTORING

Learning what careers are all about is an important first step in developing a plan for the future. Understanding what people actually do in the workplace, the skills they

need to perform their jobs effectively, and how they behave toward others is essential to making an informed career choice. It is also important to appreciate, model, and ultimately master the cultural work norms that afford work and career success. Mentoring (both formal and informal) gives students the opportunity to connect with employees and to learn from them what it takes to be successful in the workplace.

- The *Henry Ford Academy*, which is housed in the Henry Ford Museum, has become a type of laboratory. It facilitates the study of history and historical artifacts and, at the same time, provides for the development of citizenship and personal behavior management. Unlike traditional high schools, students at the academy have to adapt their behavior to the environment and culture of the museum. This means strict expectations for orderly behavior and showing respect for staff and visitors. In return, students enjoy the opportunity to interact and connect on a regular basis with adults representing a variety of occupations in the museum as well as adults at the nearby Ford Motor Company headquarters.
- At the *Academy of Plastics Manufacturing and Technology*, representatives from partnering firms have been very active in visiting interested students and pitching the academy's program. Wearing shirts with the academy logo, board members and representatives visit students and describe the career opportunities available in the plastics arena. Participating firms also provide paid work experience for students over the summer. Getting the employers to commit slots for internships has not been hard, since participating firms recognize the value of getting students to think in terms of a career in their industry. Supervisors work with the young people and suggest that the best benefit of the academy's program is seeing that the kids are comfortable in the workplace, around the machines, and with other people.

One of the hallmarks of employer-linked charter schools is the emphasis placed on real-world experience and personal connections between students and mentors in the workplace. Internships, mentoring, and job-shadowing demonstrate how employers are

using their vast resources to help students understand the needs of employers. These experiences allow the students to relate their academic work to real-world applications.

CONCLUSION

Charter schools may be just the agile, customer-driven enterprises that businesses yearn to partner with in order to upgrade the “knowledge” supply chain. They may offer the vehicle for supporting fundamental education reform.

As more firms and groups of employers look to prepare future workers and improve education, and as more innovative educators break the mold of education through charter schools, increasing numbers of businesses will be linked to charter schools.

There is no single, correct answer or recipe for the mission and practice of employer-linked charter schools. However, given the intense interest on the part of many employers and educators alike to improve education and career opportunities for youth, there is a myriad of wonderful choices for engagement.

The examples presented here, in and of themselves, cannot provide a clear-cut assessment of the strengths and weakness of employer-linked charter schools. They were deliberately chosen to represent powerful and interesting examples of how the charter school vehicle could facilitate an employer-connected learning program. As such, the charter schools paint a rosy picture of the possibilities, without balancing that picture with potentially equally powerful portraits of charter schools that did not live up to their promise (at best) or had to be closed for misrepresentation or mismanagement (at worst).

However, the purpose of the employer-linked charter school project and related work is to encourage and support improved student outcomes through charter schools. The project also seeks to describe how these schools can be used as powerful vehicles for improved student learning and business/community involvement in education.

In summary, employer-linked charter schools do appear to offer the following:

Employer-linked charter schools provide compelling, positive evidence of what charter schools can accomplish. The project team had no inkling of the scope and creativity with which charter school visionaries would use their opportunity to refashion learning. In many ways, these schools often got totally "out of the box" as defined by traditional education environments. The high degree of satisfaction on the part of students, faculty, and employer/community stakeholders with these charter school speaks of their potential power. The many examples of mold-breaking school missions, treatment of content, and teaching and learning activities revealed in the case studies illustrate what can happen when entrepreneurs and visionaries are unleashed. Whether these charter schools and others can keep up their energy and creativity—and whether the performance of these schools can go beyond the initial excitement and satisfaction of their partners—will be the test of their staying power and ultimate success.

Employer-linked charter schools can "up" the level of ownership by the business community. Charter schools offer a quantum leap in the involvement of business or any sponsoring organization in educational programming. With the responsibility of actually governing the school comes new opportunities as well as new challenges. For business partners, this means a whole new level of ownership and investment, both in terms of financial and human resource commitments and in terms of the psychological ownership of the process.

In giving business partners the chance to actually run the school and decide policy, employer-linked charter schools can allow the businesses to do things they always say they want to do, things that are important in the business culture. This includes hiring the right people, being performance-based, deriving a learning program from the outcomes they want to achieve (versus the other way around), and working year round. Plus, there is additional interest in providing the human resources, student and teacher exposure to the workworld, and support systems and technology necessary for success.

But there is also the real day-to-day challenge of running a school. This means that business partners need administrators and educators who know about schools and their culture.

The charter schools' relationship with public school systems can take many forms.

The employer-linked charter schools profiled here fit many niches in their local educational landscape strategies. Not often created as "heads-up" competitors to traditional public schools, these path-breaking schools were developed to fill a learning niche that did not exist within the public school system. Similarly, some were created to fundamentally transform an existing niche (a high school, a vocational program, etc.) that was not performing.

The common perception among many is that charter schools are focused primarily on competing with existing schools. However, this project, overall and among the individual cases studies, found more evidence of schools that were created with the support of the local school district as part of its strategic plans. Many of the schools created outside of this context were so specialized and focused on a problem area (drop-outs, at-risk students, etc.) that they were welcomed by the local educational systems. In sum, the relationship of the employer-linked charter school to the institutional structure of the school system is as varied as the schools themselves, thus making the consequences hard to predict.

Employer-linked charter schools serve diverse as well as disadvantaged student populations. Of particular interest to the U.S. Department of Education and the project team was the degree to which charter schools in general, and employer-linked charter schools in particular, could effectively serve disadvantaged and hard-to-serve populations. Consistent with charter schools nationally, employer-linked charter schools appear focused disproportionately on disadvantaged populations. The cases studied provide compelling evidence that charter schools can engage at-risk or out-of

school young people in creative programs that promise positive results. The East Bay Conservation Corps Charter School, the Skills for Tomorrow High School, and many other employer-linked schools around the country illustrate the "out-of-the box" possibilities that charter schools afford for disadvantaged students.

In addition, schools like Michigan's Henry Ford Academy show the potential for charter schools to achieve a needed goal of public education—the socioeconomic and racial integration of the student body while setting and reaching high standards. This academy's students come from the city of Detroit and from Detroit's wealthy suburbs alike. It deals with a diverse student body and incorporates them into one powerful learning program.

Employer-linked charter schools are an experiment in progress. These schools, like charter schools across the country, are new and still face the test of time. The case studies do tell us that—while these schools may be powerful venues for testing a different approach to learning—start-up is difficult and time consuming. The first few years are defined by redirection, redefinition, and continual problem solving and troubleshooting. The demands of running a business, administrative headaches, and efforts to implement a newly designed learning program all make for a chaotic first few years. Several employer-linked charter schools will now face the first tests of graduates emerging into the labor market, and evidence will become available on how they fare. Continual evaluation of these "works in progress" will be important in order to document the extent to which the initial creativity, energy, and passion translate into better outcomes.

The future value of employer and charter school linkages is likely to rise dramatically. This is the ground floor, and opportunity awaits the most nimble businesses and creative education innovators.

Just as charter schools build better outcomes and increase student, parent, teacher, and community satisfaction, so, too, do they benefit business—because they offer employer-focused education.



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